Aesthetic Dignity:

Confronting the Fraught Legacy of Els Opsomer's Senegalese Videos[1]

Hilde Van Gelder

Abstract
This essay analyzes two video works by the Belgian artist Els Opsomer (_imovie[3]_: Silver lips / for me, 2006, and Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine], 2014). It does so from the comparative perspective of the performanceDe Waarheidscommissie,Expo 1913–2013: De tentoongestelde mens(by Belgian theatre company Action Zoo Humain), which was a fierce condemnation of the infamous Ghent World Exposition of 1913. Such a comparison allows the argumentation to focus both on the differences between artistic media and the messages conveyed in them.

Résumé
Dans cette contribution, deux œuvres vidéo de l'artiste belge Els Opsomer sont analysées (_imovie[3]_: Silver lips / for me, 2006, et Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine], 2014). Cette analyse offre une perspective comparatiste de l'étude de la performance De Waarheidscommissie,Expo 1913–2013: De tentoongestelde mens, créée par la compagnie belge de théâtre Action Zoo Humain, qui condamne férocement l'infâme exposition universelle de Gand de 1913. Cela permet de se focaliser aussi bien sur la différence entre les médias artistiques que sur les messages qu'ils véhiculent.

Keywords
Els Opsomer , Action Zoo Humain , Aesthetic dignity , Photofilmic , Ghent World Exposition 1913, Postcolonialism

[1] I thank Alexander Streitberger and Brianne Cohen for their encouragements in the process of writing this essay; and Jeroen Verbeeck for research assistance during the text's preliminary phase of conception. Finally, sincere thanks to Els Opsomer and Elhadj Niang for their friendship throughout the years.

> The language of gestures goes further here than anywhere else in Italy. The conversation is impenetrable to anyone from outside. Ears, nose, eyes, breast, and shoulders are signaling stations activated by the fingers. These configurations return in their fastidiously specialized eroticism. Helping gestures and impatient touches attract the stranger's attention through a regularity that excludes chance. Yes, here his cause would be hopelessly lost, but the Neapolitan benevolently sends him away, sends him a few kilometers farther on to Mori. "*Vedere Napoli e poi Mori*," he says, repeating an old pun. "See Naples and die," says the foreigner after him.[2]

From April 18-27, 2013, for six evenings, Belgian theater-makers Chokri and Zouzou Ben Chikha staged, with their performance company Action Zoo Humain, a work titled *De Waarheidscommissie, Expo 1913–2013: De tentoongestelde mens* (*The Truth Commission, Expo 1913–2013: The Exhibited Human Being*).[3] The performance was set on location, in the Assize Court room of the now abandoned, old courthouse of Ghent. Presided over by the *éminence grise* Herman Balthazar—the former provincial governor of East-Flanders—*De Waarheidscommissie* sought a delicate balance between documentary and fictional theater.

In the "documentary" part, *De Waarheidscommissie* radically confronted its audience with the fraught legacy of the World Exposition of 1913, also held in Ghent, exactly a hundred years earlier.[4] For the duration of the fair (April–October 1913), 128 people—men, women, and children—had been shipped from Senegal to Belgium.[5] For a fee of one Belgian franc—then the daily wage of a laborer—to be paid at an entrance booth, local visitors could come and "enjoy" this exhibition of human beings in "Le village sénégalais." The Senegalese "villagers," for their part, were forced to perform—programmatically and on a daily basis—"authentic scenes," such as making jewelry, canoes, weaving, dancing and singing, washing laundry or taking a naked bath in an especially constructed "pool."[6] It is reported that the General Commissioner of the French Colonies was present at the opening ceremony in Ghent.[7] Thus—although this was a privately exploited, commercial business—government officials and diplomats amply had their words to say in the organization and presentation of the settings. It is needless to emphasize further that the underlying idea was to promote both the success and the "mercifulness" of the colonial enterprise.[8]

---

[2] Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, "Naples" (1925), in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, transl. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 173. The emphasis is in the original text. I want to dedicate this essay to the memory of Samuel IJsseling (1933–2015) who, from the late 1960s until the end of the 20th century, kept alive at Leuven University Emile Jacotot's pedagogical tradition of the so-called "ignorant master"—as Jacotot has been famously described by Jacques Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1973), transl. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). Sam IJsseling's most important instruction to his pupils was to never entirely trust what your teachers tell you, and he urged them to at all times keep an independent and critical thinking attitude.

[3] General information on this project is available via http://www.actionzoohumain.be/en/event/4/de-waarheidscommissie-the-truth-commission (accessed May 26, 2015).

[4] For documentary materials, see the website "Ghent1913virtueel:" http://www.gent1913virtueel.be (accessed May 26, 2015).

[5] An announcement poster of the "Senegalese village," including a map of its exact location in between the Ghent Fine Arts Museum and the University's Botanical Garden, is available from the website of Ghent University Library. Cf. http://adore.ugent.be/view?q=_id:%22archive.ugent.be:2E8696E0-3F66-11E1-9935-157A3B7C8C91%22&search_type=advanced (accessed May 26, 2015).

[6] Photographs documenting these activities are available at http://www.gent1913virtueel.be/items/show/ (accessed May 26, 2015).

[7] For a concise essay on the topic, including a chronology of events, cf. Annelies Delanote and Renilde Seyssens, "Instructie, spektakel en interactie. Het Senegalese en Filippijnse dorp op de Wereldtentoonstelling van Gent 1913," in Patrick Allegaert and Bert Sliggers, *De exotische mens. Andere culturen als amusement* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2009), 131-142.

[8] For historical background information on the "human zoos," cf. Karel Arnaut, "Les zoos humains, (mauvais) spectacles interculturels," in *Exhibitions. L'invention du sauvage*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée du Quai Branly, 2011), 344-366; and, for the transformation of this manipulative mechanism of representation of the "Other" into

As yesterday so today, world expositions aim to present the world to the public by providing a certain—ideologically—biased representation of it. In the 19th and early 20th century, when the Middle East, Africa, and Asia were introduced to European audiences, an emphasis was placed on the "exotic," and on "strange otherness" understood as a form of entertainment.[9] Even still in the 1930s, it was commonplace to exhibit human beings in Orientalizing expo pavilions that were furnished as "human gardens." With regard to the Ghent exposition, newspaper reports of the time were remarkably cheerful about their "villagers:" they were praised for their discipline and cleanness. Several pregnant women had been selected to travel to Belgium, and the promotional activities organized around the birth of babies "charmed" the local public, especially when one baby from the second, Filipino "village" was named Flandria.[10]

The reality behind this polished façade, however, was brutally raw. Due to their commercial exploitation, these walled gardens soon turned into amusement factories that fiercely competed to attract the most attention from both the public and the press. As a result, the "villagers" were obliged to "perform" from 9 a.m. until 11 p.m. on a daily basis—to their exhaustion. Although the shamelessly, and shamefully, exhibited persons were supposed to receive a remuneration for their "services," their true position was one of suppression and exploitation. Unused as their bodies were to contagious European diseases, several Senegalese and Filipino "villagers" fell ill, especially towards the end of the fair in October–November, when the weather turned too cold to be outdoors in clothes ill-suited for the humid Northern European climate. At least one Filipino died, but presumably the death toll rose to nine.[11]

A strikingly profound silence, as well, reigned over the death of the twenty-year-old Madi Diali, from Dakar, due to a heart disease. He was buried at the Ghent city cemetery. The painful story of Madi Diali's family members, who had to return to their home country in the winter of 1913 without him, became Chokri Ben Chikra's concrete point of departure for *De Waarheidscommissie*. He arranged for Madi Diali's remains to be exhumed from his Ghent grave. During the performance, they were presented centrally in the former courtroom, in a coffin covered by the Senegalese flag, behind the "judges" of the "Truth Commission." Three young members of the Diali family had traveled from Senegal: they came to claim the body of their ancestor, and were present as "witnesses."[12] The theater piece's setting in a former Assize Court room provided an occasion for questioning the borderline between reality and fiction. Despite the absence of any enforceable legislation to judge the historical facts today, *De Waarheidscommissie* accused, rather directly, the disquieting practice of the Human Zoo. Several "fictional" aspects were also added to the discussions, as *De Waarheidscommissie* explicitly sought to provoke the audience. Several times during the performance, spectators were made to feel terribly uncomfortable, such as when Chokri and Zouzou Ben Chikra acted out a fictitious scene in which they refused to render the three Diali family members their

---

contemporary television culture, cf. Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boëtsch, Éric Deroo, and Sandrine Lemaire (eds), *Zoos humains. De la vénus hottentote aux* reality shows (Paris: La Découverte, 2002).

[9] Cf. Lieven De Cauter, "Over wereldtentoonstellingen: opkomst en verval van de panoramische blik," in *De panoramische droom. Antwerpen en de wereldtentoonstellingen*, exhib. cat. (Antwerp: Antwerpen 93, 1993), 37-50. See also Francis Dujardin's documentary *Boma-Tervuren, le Voyage* (2002), tracing the Human Zoo constructed in the Belgian village of Tervuren on the occasion of the world exposition of 1897.

[10] Cf. Evelien Jonckheere, "'Ach, waarom zou ik het u ook verzwijgen?...' Ontbering achter de schermen van de 'zoos humains,'" in Wouter Vanacker and Christophe Verbruggen, *Gent 1913. Op het breukvlak van de moderniteit* (Ghent: Snoeck, 2013), 103.

[11] Patricia O. Afable, "Journeys from Bontoc to the Western Fairs, 1904-1915: The 'Nikimala' and their Interpreters," *Philippine Studies*, 52: 4 (2004): 467.

[12] A clip of an excerpt of the performance is available at http://www.actionzoohumain.be/en/event/4/de-waarheidscommissie-the-truth-commission (accessed May 26, 2015).

passports back, for fear that they would submerge illegally in Belgium and not return to Senegal—a situation that could result in both theater makers being sued.

If such events had actually occurred in the aftermath of *De Waarheidscommissie*, it probably would have aroused more public attention. Yet, on the contrary, *De Waarheidscommissie*'s sequence of performances went by relatively unnoticed. Reception in the press was lukewarm: it was argued that the work was bogged down in good intentions and that the question as to what lessons needed to be drawn for today were answered in a one-sided and incriminating way.[13] However much the evenings in the "courtroom" were filled with anger and grief, *De Waarheidscommissie* ended without causing any collective outrage. Only a local feeling of shame and uneasiness resurfaced, resulting in an apology to the descendants of the "villagers" by the Ghent mayor, Daniël Termont, in a video clip released on April 9, 2013.[14] After this, the public's same overall silence and indifference continued to reign just as ever before, however much *Action Zoo Humain* tried desperately to turn the tide.

One remarkable exception was the influential, alternative online news website *DeWereldMorgen.be*, on which one group of commentators posted extremely pressing questions. They pointed out how *De Waarheidscommissie* was "an event" that "gave its participants/viewers a few punches in the stomach."[15] Their outrage was first oriented towards the past: "How could this have happened?" Then, interestingly, they transferred their anger to the context of today, asking: "Why do we know so little about this dark page of our history?" That was a sledgehammer blow. Indeed, during the performance, actor Mourade Zeguendi urged contemporary Belgian government officials to integrate an obligatory teaching of the colonial regime's excesses in the general public school program. Still today, this is not systematically the case: it is the history teacher's independent choice about what to teach pupils with regard to both Belgium's colonial past and related topics such as the presence of "human zoos" on Belgian soil. The result of this relative non-education within Belgian society is undeniable, and it is easily traceable both to contemporary spoken language and in media discourse. For example, in a feature article concerning the publication of a new monograph on the Ghent World Exposition of 1913, even the Flemish "quality journal" *De Standaard* did not refrain from using a rather ironic tone, describing without much nuance or self-criticism the "exhibited Senegalese" and the "Filipino headhunters."[16] So, most important of all, the bloggers of *DeWereldMorgen.be* pertinently asked: "What does that say, still today, about us?" In order to investigate this further, I propose to now turn attention to the artworks of Els Opsomer.

"I_movie"

In 2006 and 2012, respectively, Belgian artist Els Opsomer completed two photofilmic works with strong autobiographical content. The first one, entitled *_imovie[3]_*: *Silver lips / for me* (2006), is a twelve-minute-long love letter to the artist's fiancé, who, at the time, was stuck in his home country Senegal, waiting for his papers to be arranged so that the couple could finally be reunited. The work displays footage filmed in and around the house where he lives in Rufisque, a small city near Dakar. It bursts with subtle hints and language games, beginning

[13] Cf. http://www.gentblogt.be/2013/04/20/de-goede-bedoelingen-van-de-waarheidscommissie (accessed May 26, 2015). For an overview of its reception in the media, cf. http://www.actionzoohumain.be/files/persoverzicht-de-waarheidscommissie.pdf (accessed May 26, 2015).

[14] Cf. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2Qb2DIWOmw (accessed May 26, 2015).

[15] Greet Brauwers, Christophe Callewaert, and Wouter Elsen, "De Waarheidscommissie: de impact van ons koloniaal verleden op ons heden:" cf. http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/video/2013/04/19/de-waarheidscommissie-de-impact-van-ons-koloniaal-verleden-op-ons-heden (accessed May 26, 2015). Author's translation.

[16] Wouter Woussen, "Blikvanger: de tentoongestelde wilden van 1913: 'Enkele negers en wat geelhuidigen,'" *De Standaard*, April 13, 2013, p. 26.

already with its title. In conversation, the artist has emphasized how the rather technical denomination "imovie"—referring simply to the software program she used in order to make it (iMovie)—also indicates a personal layer of meanings, full of deictic markers and shifters: the "i" referring to the first person, or the "I" who is the author of this video letter. Opsomer's three "I_movies," as she also identifies them, are videos constructed through an assembly of photographic images. These are accompanied by texts projected onto the images, and they testify to a high degree of psychological or even political commitment by the artist. The I_movies contain a strongly worked-out narrative dimension. They provide a "constructed story," which is methodologically related to classical photomontage techniques.

In the opening minutes of *_imovie[3]_*: *Silver lips / for me*, the sound rapidly shifts from birds chirping to a long sequence in which one only hears the ocean washing ashore. The first sentence to appear on screen states, "Wrapped in silence" (fig. 1). Opsomer's video letter continues to describe how her distant lover is "the deep alliance of [her] soul, […] the shadow of [her] existence, glued to her body," […] yet "too dark to be understood." This reads as a subtle warning to the viewer. For, although the work apparently begins in a quite "poetic" way, its underlying tone undeniably steeps in anger. The intertitles increasingly shift towards an expression of revulsion and revolt against a legal and societal system that is completely inadequate with regard to the couple's deep, sincere feelings. The artist describes the ordeal that she has to undergo in doing the heavy paperwork required by the Belgian authorities, and how she is faced with "their fantasy" regarding his "absent body," a fantasy of "horror and danger."

Fig. 1 Els Opsomer, _imovie[3]_: Silver lips / for me, 2006, iMovie, color, sound, 12 min. 14 sec. Courtesy of the artist. © Els Opsomer.

*_imovie[3]_*: *Silver lips / for me* does not shy away from confronting its spectators with

Fig. 2 Els Opsomer, _imovie[3]_: Silver lips / for me, 2006, iMovie, color, sound, 12 min. 14 sec. Courtesy of the artist. © Els Opsomer.

collective taboos that still surround the complex legacy of European colonialism. Els Opsomer was pregnant with the couple's first child while she was waiting for her future husband to join her in Brussels. In her video letter, she describes how the folks in the street seek to give her a bad feeling about the profound joy of her impending motherhood. Nastily, it is suggested to be her "misfortune," this pregnancy from the supposedly "evil devil." Refusing to go along with this utterly clichéd "nightmare of the unexpected" that still reigns over Belgian collective fantasy today, Opsomer accuses the systemic efforts to both deny and destabilize their relationship. Asked an impossible task by the authorities, to explain in words the intimate secrets of her alliance—which run through but also move beyond their native languages (Wolof and Dutch)—she prefers to return the officials' painful silence and obeys them by simply filling out the paperwork. Her more rebellious reply to them is this resolutely voluptuous work of art. Opsomer's images bathe in warm sunlight, sometimes to the point of being overexposed. Colors are deeply tinted, as if overheated. Contrasts between black and white are intentional (fig. 2). But the artist makes sure to readily fade them out or to display such distinctions in a largely abstracted, blurred way. As a consequence, these grainy images provide an impression of a delicate, porous beauty—a beauty generated by the love tie between the man and woman who are the key protagonists of this visual letter.

In the end, *_imovie[3]_*: *Silver lips / for me* obtains a more universal meaning, beyond the artist's biography. Seen in light of the exhibition of human beings in 1913, Els Opsomer's work also reads as an implicit acknowledgement of—or should we rather say, a tribute to—the

sincere grief suffered by these young men and women almost one hundred years earlier, ridiculed as they were by the larger Belgian public. In contrast to Els Opsomer and her husband, they probably saw their dreams for building futures together completely shattered. In fact, it is widely reported that in the immediate aftermath of the Ghent fair, a few well-to-do, marriageable Belgian women—reprovingly denominated *juffers* ("damsels") in the *Gazette van Gent* of November 22, 1913—waved goodbye in tears to some of the Senegalese men who left their town for good.[17] Rumors about these inappropriate expressions of emotion spread to such a degree that a moralistic comedy was performed at the local Minard Schouwburg (Minard Theater) one month after the closing of the exposition. Its title, "Wit of Zwart" ("White or Black") alludes rather explicitly to the potentially disastrous consequences of amorous relations for the young ladies who had frequented the fair all too often.

The imagery on the theater piece's poster announcement was bluntly vulgar: it is, indeed, an overt caricature.[18] It is worth elaborating briefly on the semiology of the clichés employed. Displaying the word *wit* ("white") at the top left of the picture, the word's outline is rimmed with a black marker. This appears to suggest that the young woman depicted just underneath is not only white on the inside, but also completely shaped by her whiteness. The word *zwart* ("black") can be found right below the man. This inscription, in turn, is completely printed in black, as if to affirm that this is what he is—profoundly black all over, through and through. Man and woman are positioned next to one another, but are separated by the word *of* ("or")—the "o" even underlined, thus suggesting the form of an exclamation mark, and therefore a warning sign. The woman stands slightly in the man's shadow, a shadow that both installs a clear demarcation between them and suggests another exclamation mark when viewed together with the purse hanging from her arm. This sheepishly naïve-looking yet elegant woman carries an umbrella with a black stick. With its curly end, she manages to capture the equally curly top of a white walking stick, which the rather dumb-looking, clumsy black man holds in his hands. The cover image of the play's textbook, written by Hector Van Seymortier and Henri Van Daele, is also bluntly racist in its stereotyping.[19] It shows the profile of an ape-looking, sub-Saharan African man peeping right into the splendidly deep décolleté of a languishing Northern European woman. Behind them, on the horizon, a Senegalese-like village is depicted—yet another warning sign that this is where you will end up living if you break the "rules."

But what "rules" are these if they imply that it is socially accepted that both the Senegalese and the Filipino "villagers" were abandoned after the exposition's dismantling, as if they could be considered part of the garbage?[20] Is there some way to justify the fact that a respected Flemish writer Karel Van de Woestijne (scholarly consensus suggests that his phrasings are meant "ironically")[21] felt comfortable describing the "race-crossing passions at the Citadelpark with regard to the Senegalese" in terms of "flirts between Ghentian girls and

[17] Thanks to the organization of four convivial balls, "blanc ou noir" ("white or black"), locals were able to meet and fraternize with the Senegalese. When some young women cried at the train station or even dared to embrace one last time their Senegalese boyfriends, they were publicly called all sorts of names. Cf. Jonckheere, "'Ach, waarom zou ik het u ook verzwijgen?...,'" 2013, 103 (see note 10).

[18] For a reproduction of this image, cf. http://www.gent1913virtueel.be/items/show/1527 (accessed May 26, 2015).

[19] For a reproduction of this image, cf. http://www.gent1913virtueel.be/items/show/2050 (accessed May 26, 2015).

[20] For the scandal caused, first in the foreign press, by the fact that the "villagers" were left behind when the impresarios left, obliging them to beg in and around the Ghent Citadelpark, cf. Jonckheere, "'Ach, waarom zou ik het u ook verzwijgen?...,'" 2013, 97 (see note 10).

[21] Cf. Delanote and Seyssens, "Instructie, spektakel en interactie," 2009, 136 (see note 7).

man-eating niggers?"[22] He may have written these lines as a child of his own time, but nonetheless, he shockingly puts into words a then widespread opinion. It is one that draws a simplistic demarcation between Western civilized identity and barbaric Otherness. Even today, one still is able to trace the impact of such phrasings in contemporary language. The rather common denomination of immigrant neighborhoods in contemporary Western European cities as "ghetto zoos" may suffice to substantiate this.

In an insightful essay on Peter Friedl's *The Zoo Story* (2007), Marco Scotini provides a sharp and critical analysis of the way in which humans need stereotypic projections in order to not only create, but also maintain capitalist consensus. Such a normative "model of standardization," Scotini argues, benefits from "the division into races and the hierarchical orders derived therefrom." This may, regrettably, go so far as to "aim at the animalization of the human being."[23] In Friedl's work, Antonio Gramsci's concept of the "subaltern" occupies a central position.[24] Both Friedl and Scotini put great hope in stimulating the emancipatory capacity of the subaltern individual, in helping her/him to struggle against those groups who are in power and on the side of the dominant social and economic hegemony. Scotini explicitly connects the success of this emancipatory enterprise to the question of representation:

> "The problem of emancipation (cognitive, social, etc.) is […] one of representation: how have we been represented? How can we represent ourselves in a completely different way, if we would give ourselves a structure through special discursive forms, semiotic, linguistic production, temporary practices and counterpositions?"[25]

*_imovie[3]_*: *Silver lips / for me* articulates such a "counterposition." At this point, one may remember Opsomer writing to her lover that he is "the shadow of [her] existence" (fig. 3). Yet, in the early 21st century, she no longer literally stands in her lover's shadow. On the contrary, she manages to arrange for his papers, and marries him. *_imovie[3]_*: *Silver lips / for me* ends with a musing reflection on temporality: the time it will take to learn one another's language in more depth, the time to get to understand one another better, and the "time to be lived." This hopeful closing note, which implies her firm belief in a richness of open perspectives, contrasts sharply with the complete lack of opportunities a century ago. In Opsomer's work, the conditional perfect tense of unrealized historical time—the "this would have been" of a 1913 love affair—thus transforms into the more desire-triggering, optimistic future perfect of "this will have been."

---

[22] Karel Van de Woestijne, "De leemen torens. Kronijk van twee steden. Eerste boek. II. Karel Van de Woestijne aan Herman Teirlinck, Ghent, 29 July 1913," *De Gids*, 81 (1917): 257. Author's translation. Available at: http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_gid001191701_01/_gid001191701_01_0017.php (accessed May 26, 2015).

[23] Marco Scotini, "Die Reise der Giraffe," in Dirk Snauwaert (ed.), *Über Peter Friedl* (Berlin: Motto Books, 2013), 170. Author's translation.

[24] Cf. also Hilde Van Gelder, "Intermediality, for the sake of radical neutrality, in Peter Friedl's work," in Raphaël Pirenne and Alexander Streitberger (eds), *Heterogeneous Objects: Intermedia and Photography after Modernism* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013), 170.

[25] Scotini, "Die Reise der Giraffe," 182-183 (see note 23). Author's translation.

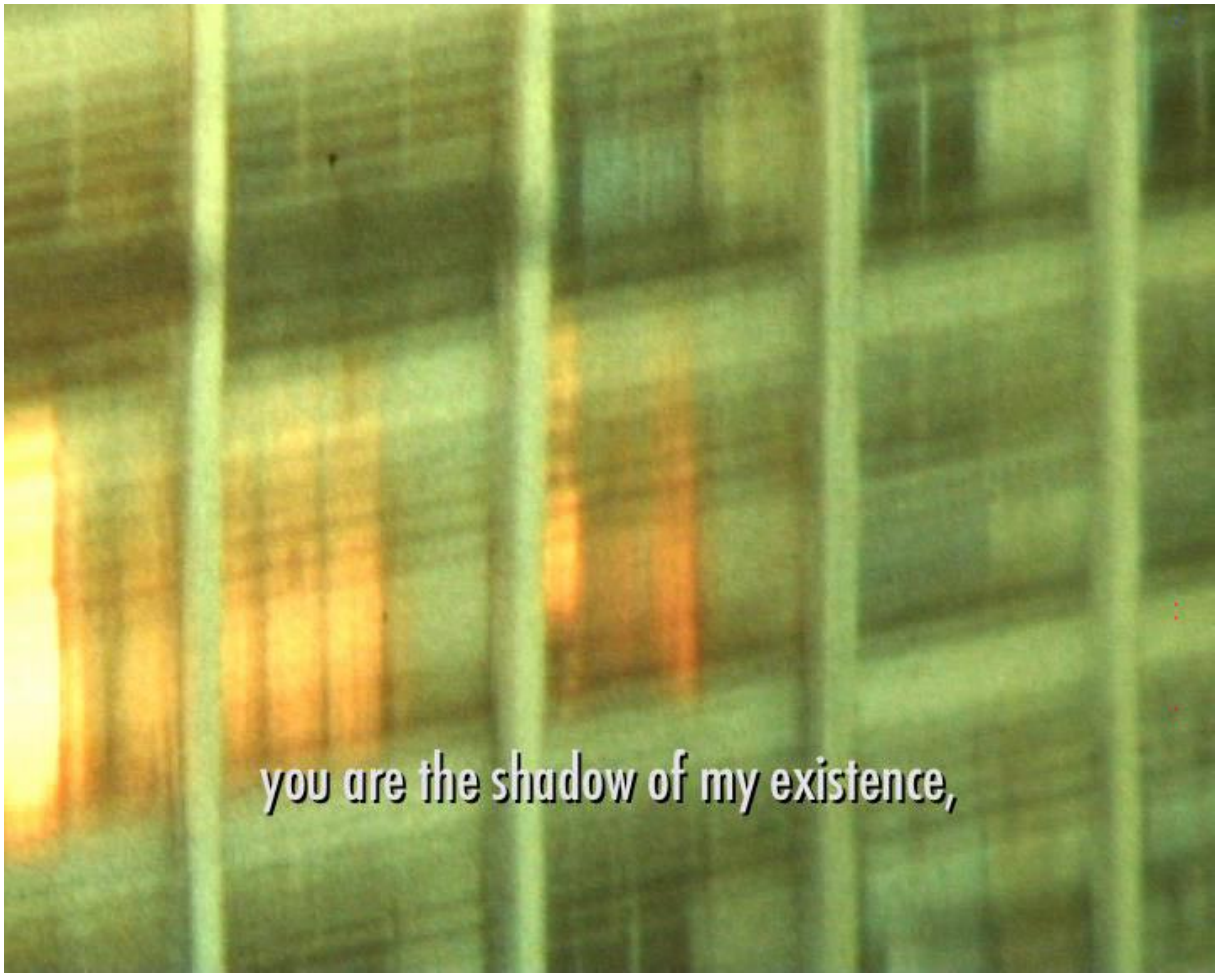

Fig. 3 Els Opsomer, _imovie[3]_: Silver lips / for me, 2006, iMovie, color, sound, 12 min. 14 sec. Courtesy of the artist. © Els Opsomer.

While viewing *_imovie[3]_*: *Silver lips / for me*, the spectator realizes that, through the subtle interplay between shadows and contrasts, the clear-cut linearity of the relationship between past, present, and future becomes increasingly fractured. As a result, fictional zones of indeterminacy are created: zones of potential temporality, in which the past may lose its firmly installed aspect of "historical truth." Thus reconsidered, the past meanders into the present while feeding our imagination. It allows us to conceive of possible futures, futures that find shape in their being nurtured by the past's revivified spectrum. Consequently, however fraught it still remains, the past seems not to have been completely in vain—since the impossible (then) both catalyzes and compels the possible (now). These futures are fragile and conditional: they need to be taken care of with close attention. They depend on potentialities that will or will not be fulfilled, and on experiences, ties, and shared stories that are waiting to be constructed.

"Building Stories"

Eight years later, in 2014, Els Opsomer completed a work that reconsiders her intimate relationship to Senegal and its people. *Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine]* (42 min.) turns out to be a rather different artistic tackling of the subject. In the very first seconds of the work, a private courtyard is displayed, but in an extremely blurred way, from behind a window (fig. 4). Immediately thereafter, and even before the film's title has been shown, the camera decisively turns its focus away from a family atmosphere. Consequently—although *Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine]*, once again, is for a very large part filmed

in and near Rufisque, where Opsomer's in-laws live—the immediate, personal relationship between the artist and her work's subject matter can no longer be detected as readily. The presence of her husband and children becomes minimal or, rather, liminal. Instead, her attention has shifted to streets and buildings, roads and crossroads, unfinished turnpikes and train stations, an immense baobab tree, factories, and people sitting by and walking on the beach.[26]

Fig. 4 Els Opsomer, Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine], 2014, 16 mm film transferred to HD video, color, sound, 42 min. 27 sec. Courtesy of the artist. © Els Opsomer.

Contrary to *_imovie[3]_*: *Silver lips / for me*, *Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine]* is not a video montage of still photographs. This time the images were shot as a film, on a 16 mm roll. Due to the limitations of the filmic medium—one does not always completely control what happens while shooting a sequence—the narrative impact of this work is more open-ended and less steered by the artist, who appears to have moved away from overtly personal statements. What is on display now, seems more "objectified." The viewer has a sense that the artist, this time, is rather screening her investigative material with a scanner, as if she has retreated from the intimacy of her chosen topic, and has taken a certain "distance." However, this should not be understood as a form of disengagement. On the contrary: upon watching the work, one soon realizes that the film's footage only appears the way it does because its maker is so profoundly familiar with her observed content.

The reader may have already noted that this apparent paradox between a simultaneous feeling of "distance" and some sort of "possessive nearness" is an element at which Opsomer herself hints via the oxymoron in her latest work's subtitle. This makes the work all the more remarkable. While she was shooting the material, she must have been so deeply blended into the surroundings that the inhabitants of Rufisque, whom she frequently registers with the camera, barely seem to have noticed her. The locals' peculiar lack of interest in her as a white female filmmaker, most of the time accompanied by an equally white cameraman, Sebastien Koeppel, thus ends up being a provocative, reflective element in the film. A work that seems

[26] For a lengthy and more in-depth discussion about the then still uncompleted work, cf. T.J. Demos, Els Opsomer, and Hilde Van Gelder, "Roundtable Four: A Discussion of Els Opsomer's *Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine]*," in T.J. Demos and H. Van Gelder (eds), *In and Out of Brussels: Figuring Postcolonial Africa and Europe in the Films of Herman Asselberghs, Sven Augustijnen, Renzo Martens, and Els Opsomer* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 99-117.

less personal at first glance, eventually turns out to be both all the more emphatic and empirically lived through—since, otherwise, she could not have possibly made it.

On an earlier occasion, I proposed positively identifying this artistic approach as one of "productive indifference"— attributing three formal characteristics to it:[27]

1. *Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine]* is a multi-mediating work of art, which succeeds in making several "realities" interplay with one another.[28] It confronts its spectators with hybrid, composite images that hold a middle ground between photography and film. Camera shots are often held for so long that the viewer gets the impression of observing a photograph in which only certain elements seem to move—such as cars on a roundabout (fig. 5). Although it has now been transferred to a digital format, the viewer still gets a clear sense of the fragile, material tangibility of the less pixilated 16 mm film. *Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine]* thus assembles characteristics of various media without merging them together into one medium.

Fig. 5 Els Opsomer, Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine], 2014, 16 mm film transferred to HD video, color, sound, 42 min. 27 sec. Courtesy of the artist. © Els Opsomer.

This sets into motion a process of visual communication in which our own thoughts and reflections flow precisely from this effort of combining media. Such a multiplication of media serves to highlight that, in everyday reality as well, mono-dimensional views of the "real world" are impossible. From there, a complex ensemble of potential meanings prevents us from turning towards a one-sided statement.

2. *Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine]* is full of blanks and blurs. A blur may cause distortion of the represented subject matter. But it may also, paradoxically, open up new possibilities with regard to how that very same image may be read. The blurred image does not pretend to lay any claim to presenting an objective, veracious fact. As a consequence, the

[27] Hilde Van Gelder, "Aesthetic Dignity," in Marta Ponsa and Hilde Van Gelder (eds), *Inventer le possible / Inventing the possible*, software application available for download on iPad via the App Store and for download on Android via Google Play (accessed May 26, 2015).

[28] For a further definition of a multi-mediating artwork, cf. H. Van Gelder and H. Westgeest, "Photography and Painting in Multi-Mediating Pictures," *Visual Studies*, 24, 2 (2009): 122-131.

temporality of such images becomes filled with potentialities, both on a private, personal and on a public, political level.

3. *Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine]* makes use neither of a voiceover nor of integrated text passages. Instead, the film proposes a sound experience. Thus, verbal silence reigns, which is only distorted by the quite monotonous, repetitive score. Such a disruptive, yet at the same time subdued, artistic strategy puts a responsibility on the viewer. Opsomer encourages us to actively engage in thinking about what we can learn from the aesthetic "dignity" of the Senegalese people that speaks to us via the enigmatic, multilayered message of her work.[29] *Building Stories #001 [That Distant Piece of Mine]* thus calls for an allied spectatorship that engages in imagining renewed forms of civil community today.

There is an urgency to the current situation. To an ever-increasing extent, the Mediterranean Sea today has tragically turned into a human cemetery, with large numbers of migrants desperately sailing off from the coasts of Northern Africa.[30] For many years, so-called "Fortress Europe" has demonstrated relative unconcern towards this humanitarian catastrophe. Only very recently, in late April 2015, public outrage—under additional pressure from the international community outside of Europe—reached a degree that European government officials, admittedly in a painfully reluctant way, saw themselves as obliged to somehow react. This shameful situation, even demonstrating a poignant lack of solidarity among European nations themselves, contrasts sharply with the high ideals proclaimed in Article 1 of the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2000). There, it reads that "human dignity" is not only an "inviolable" right, but also "must be respected and protected."[31]

Works of art such as *Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine]* provide a subtle answer to the habitual coldness with which the European "impotence" to enforce the fundamental right to human dignity is met by the general public. Opsomer's film does not in any way directly accuse that deficit. Instead, it opts for making perspectives shift on the level of the viewers of her work. Western Europeans have been both educated and visually indoctrinated to expect certain prototypical pictures of Africans and their territory, such as emaciated persons imploring and begging for our help. Yet, in this case, the Rufisque inhabitants' disinterest in seizing the occasion of the artist filming them in order to appeal to us—potential "benefactors"—becomes a productive imaginative force for "story building" in the viewers' minds. What if, indeed, the film's message is that those Western European citizens who have never set foot on the African continent should reconsider their entrenched opinions about what exactly it is like to live there, in "Africa"? Put more strongly, what does this sudden "distancing" on the side of the filmed persons, their "disregarding us," as viewers of the work, teach about how to conceive life here, in Europe?

With *Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine]*, explaining how she intended to tackle the difficult relationship between Europe and Africa today, Els Opsomer emphasizes that it is "[t]he distress caused by the violence around [her, which] provokes a constant search for new 'strategies of survival.'"[32] She further identifies these "survival strategies" in terms of repetitively "looking and observing [her daily] surroundings" and "represent[ing] them to an audience." As such, she is able to "re-appropriate" these places, and to propose "ideas that enable a mental shift in order to live a joyful life without ignoring the conflicts and neoliberal

[29] Els Opsomer, in the above-mentioned conversation with T.J. Demos and Hilde Van Gelder, insists on the word "dignity" in relation to *Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine]*: "Roundtable Four," 2012, 117 (see note 26).

[30] Cf. The report recently released by Amnesty International: "Europe's Sinking Shame: The Failure to Save Refugees and Migrants at Sea," April 2015. Available at: http://www.amnesty.fr/sites/default/files/sarbriefingpdf.pdf (accessed May 26, 2015).

[31] Cf. http://www.eucharter.org/home.php?page_id=8 (accessed May 26, 2015).

[32] Els Opsomer, "Artist's Statement," in Marta Ponsa and Hilde Van Gelder (eds), *Inventer le possible / Inventing the possible* [accessed 26 May 2015] (see note 29). The following quotations can also be found there.

frameworks in place." For Opsomer, this working method allows her to find a "fundamental way of resistance." As an antidote to the "reality on media screens [that] can be hard," she injects the spectators of her works with "the simple values and dignity of daily life." Via her focus upon "small gestures and scenes" she aims to "oppose the harsh political reality and history of so many places in this world." She believes that, as a result, viewers will "take a more doubtful stand towards" reality, and may shift their perspective on it. "The act of looking, and not turning away," she concludes, "enables a change in conscience; a positive stand in an often too tense world."

Building Stories #001 [That distant piece of mine] thus offers room for interpretation by the viewer, but at the same time hopes to stimulate deeper thinking concerning the topics that it addresses. Meanings to be found in the work ultimately remain opaque, unclear, but nonetheless one cannot help but conclude that they are flying at our throat. With this film, Opsomer is "building stories" with a much less clear-cut structure, but exactly because of this, it opens up our imaginative thinking. When famously writing about Naples, Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis praise the amazing porosity of both the city itself and its inhabitants. At the same time, they send out a warning. A foreigner will never truly understand the complex, refined gestural language of the people from Naples, and their sophisticated way of being in the world. The authors also provide the reason why: as an outsider, one remains constantly—and frustratingly—on the wrong foot. What therefore matters, the implied message may be, is to become an insider, to take the effort to really get to know one another. Only then will one not fall into the trap of indoctrination and misinformation.

Els Opsomer radically refuses to confront us with a "spectatorship of suffering," a perfidious, representational mechanism exercised time and again by the contemporary mainstream media in a highly sophisticated way. Instead, the counter-model of visual representation that she develops is one that works with subtle traces, indices, and signs. In his essay on Peter Friedl's works, Marco Scotini identifies such a model in terms of what he calls the "indizienparadigma," or "evidence paradigm."[33] Both Friedl's and Opsomer's works provide insight into how social and political power mechanisms operate today, by looking at reality itself, by observing these "appearances to which one normally does not attach any particular meaning, and which therefore escape control." As such, their works are able to identify "symptoms" and "evidence" where these are not "supposed" to be encountered.

Such "evidence," it needs emphasis, is not necessarily one that can readily be used in a court of law. Although in this essay, I clearly advocate taking this type of "evidence" as seriously as possible, my aim is not to debunk the importance of courts. On the contrary, a just, democratic society needs public prosecutors and courts, which should have rightful laws at their disposal. *De Waarheidscommissie*, retrospectively, sought to fill the gap where these laws had failed or were even absent. However necessary this may be on the level of collective therapy, caution remains of crucial importance—for such a staging may lead to further misunderstandings. At a key moment in the theater piece, the public was invited to watch a female dancer, Chantal Loïal, execute a choreography by Koen Augustijnen.[34] Against a backdrop of dramatic classical music, she impressively performed from behind a window, as if captured in a glass cage and thus separated from the observing audience. To be sure, via her dance, both performer and choreographer succeeded in somehow rendering back to all previously exhibited women, the voice that they had so direly lacked. In a most sublime way, Loïal screamed and screeched, as if she were fully captured in the trance of a liberation dance.

[33] Scotini, "Die Reise der Giraffe," 186 (see note 23). Author's translation of the citation that follows hereafter, which is on the same page.

[34] Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5QnZVr4Kb4 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqoKSFN8cB8 (accessed May 26, 2015).

Deliberately, this choreography came very close to restaging the observational conditions of the human zoo—yet with the intention to breach them. After her dance, Chantal Loïal carried the skull of Madi Diali in an illuminated glass case through the audience's space. *De Waarheidscommissie*—as a theater work—thus fully indulged in the communicative possibilities of its own medium-condition, conveying an overtly literal and confrontational message to the spectators. Through this radically one-sided statement, the members of the "court" all confessed to their own partiality and pronounced a harsh judgement of history. However justified such partiality may be from the perspective of history, a normal court presupposes impartial judges. Regretfully, impartiality was also lacking in relation to a "judgement" that *De Waarheidscommissie* appeared to express in relation to the contemporary spectator. During the course of the theater piece, the public was amply confronted with the predominantly conservative policy of the then reigning Flemish government with regard to the integration of new immigrants. Even if this government was indeed elected by a democratically composed majority of the population, the theater makers' suggestion that this immigration program captures the general Flemish undercurrent of thought came out as too simplifying.

However much the public needs reiterated warnings that we should not repeat historical mistakes, one cannot readily blame the people of today for what happened in the past. Els Opsomer's multimedial, photofilmic works prove to be key operators in stimulating a more serene, collective debate. Her subdued compositions—that she, impressively, has managed to preserve from the art world's "deeply economized" circus by displaying them in carefully chosen institutional and academic contexts—are marked by the artist's detailed and precise sense of observation.[35] By radically shifting the perspective away from a framework of violent accusation to one of resolute seduction, her works further render a voice to those who have been, and are still, shamefully silenced. This may, hopefully, prove to be the "productively indifferent" force we collectively need for shaping a joint future.

Hilde Van Gelder is associate professor of modern and contemporary art history at the University of Leuven (Belgium). She is director of the Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography (www.lievengevaertcentre.be).
Email: Hilde.VanGelder@arts.kuleuven.be

[35] The term "deeply economized" is a translation from Chris Dercon's recent problematizing of the contemporary visual art world as "vollständig durchökonomisiert." Cf., among others, http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/volksbuehne-chris-dercon-stellt-team-plaene-vor-a-1030552.html (accessed May 26, 2015).